



Ecocriticism Meets Subaltern Studies: A Framework from the Sundarbans in Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide"

D. Srija¹, Dr. K. Mahalakshmi²

¹Department of English, Sree Saraswati Thyagaraja College, Pollachi, Tamil Nadu, India

²Associate Professor, RVS College of Arts and Science College, Coimbatore, Tamil Nadu, India

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Abstract— This paper investigates the convergence of ecocriticism and subaltern studies through Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide", which is set in the ecologically vulnerable and politically marginalized Sundarbans. By integrating the issues of environmental degradation and marginalization of subaltern voices—especially those of refugees, indigenous populations, and the non-human realm—this article introduces a novel framework termed Eco-Subalternity. Ghosh's narrative illustrates how prevailing ecological discourses, including conservation and climate policy, frequently silence those who are most impacted by environmental decisions. The depiction of the Morichjhanpi massacre, Fokir's instinctive ecological knowledge and the conflict between scientific inquiry and lived experiences highlight the necessity for a critical perspective that merges ecological justice with subaltern agency. This work champions an inclusive ecocriticism that considers the perspectives of both human and non-human subalterns, recognizing the power dynamics inherent in their voices, spaces, and struggles for survival.



Keywords— Ecocriticism, Eco-Subalternity, Indigeneous, Marginalism, Power dynamics, Subalternity

I. INTRODUCTION

Ecocriticism is an interdisciplinary field that examines the complex relationship between literature and natural environment. It analyzes how literary works represent nature, influencing human attitudes and reflecting our interactions with the environment. Drawing on fields like literary theory, environmental studies, and philosophy, ecocriticism explores how nature is defined, valued, and utilized. It also investigates how these perspectives shape both human actions and environmental outcomes. Ecocritics also analyze how literature addresses environmental issues, promotes awareness, and encourages activism. They critique human-centered views and advocates for an earth-centered perspective that values all living things equally. Though nature has long featured in literature, ecocriticism emerged as a distinct academic field in the late 20th century, initially focussing on "nature writing".

Subaltern Studies, begun in the early 1980s by Ranajit Guha's South Asia-based group, re-examines history,

focusing on marginalized groups (due to caste, gender, ethnicity, etc.) in colonial and postcolonial contexts. It uses Gramsci's hegemony to show how dominant groups maintain control culturally, while emphasizing subaltern agency and resistance outside formal politics. Silencing is a form of 'epistemic violence,' where dominant knowledge systems prevent subaltern voices from being heard. Despite this, Subaltern Studies seeks to reveal subaltern consciousness and agency by interpreting non-traditional sources like oral histories and folklore, demonstrating that these groups actively resist.

The Sundarbans, straddling India and Bangladesh, is a unique and significant mangrove ecosystem—the largest globally. This rich habitat supports diverse flora and fauna, including the Royal Bengal Tiger, Crocodile and endangered Gangetic Dolphin. Beyond its ecological importance, it's also a subaltern space where marginalized communities confront challenges from natural forces, global environmental changes, and decisions made by distant authorities. The Sundarbans are formed by the confluence of the Ganges, Brahmaputra, and Meghna

rivers, resulting in a constantly changing deltaic region. Its landscape is shaped by the daily movement of tides, the deposition of river sediments, and mixing of freshwater and saltwater. The dense mangrove forests act as a critical natural barrier, protecting the densely populated areas from cyclones, storm surges, and coastal erosion. They help absorb wind and wave energy, playing a vital role in climate resilience for millions of people.

The Sundarbans, though ecologically vital, is a subaltern space marked by the marginalization of its millions of poor and vulnerable inhabitants. These communities face high-risk livelihoods, lacking basic infrastructure and services, and are disproportionately impacted by climate change (rising sea levels, saltwater intrusion, and severe cyclones). Their struggles for survival are largely unacknowledged in broader discussions. The lives and traditional practices of the local inhabitants are often secondary to the goals of conservation and tourism, highlighting a power imbalance where their voices in policy-making are limited. The narratives surrounding the Sundarbans are often dominated by external perspectives "such as scientific conservationists, government agencies, or tourism promoters, who overlook the complex realities and deep knowledge of the local inhabitants.

The Sundarbans has historically faced exploitation, from colonial timber extraction to unsustainable aquaculture, often driven by external economic interests. Its inhabitants have been treated as labor or impediments to development. This region exemplifies how environmental issues are profoundly intertwined with social justice, power dynamics, and the silencing of marginalized voices that disproportionately suffer from both natural forces and external human interventions.

II. ECOLOGY AND MARGINALITY INTERSECTION

This research adopts a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in eco-subalternity. "The Hungry Tide" bridges ecocriticism and subaltern studies, showing how ecology and marginality intersect in postcolonial contexts and captures core strength of Amitav Ghosh's novel. The novel vividly portrays how the natural environment dictates their lives, livelihoods, and the very survival. The historical event of the Morichjhanpi massacre is crucial. It directly links environmental policy (the creation of a tiger reserve) with the brutal displacement and killing of thousands of impoverished refugees. This is a stark example of how "conservation" can become a tool of state power that marginalizes and silences the subaltern, demonstrating that ecological concerns can be leveraged against human rights.

The novel highlights a central challenge, giving voice to both marginalized human communities and the nonhuman natural world. Fokir's inability to communicate with Piya in English serves as a metaphor for the broader difficulty in representing the complex, often unrecorded experiences of subaltern groups. Simultaneously, the inherent wildness and untamable nature of the Sundarbans itself symbolizes the resistance of the natural world to human attempts at categorization and control, asserting its own powerful, independent presence.

Ghosh critiques how postcolonial states often perpetuate colonial attitudes, prioritizing externally defined "nature" in conservation policies over the rights and well-being of local, marginalized communities. The "Hungry Tide" argues that environmental and social justice are inseparable, emphasizing that true sustainability must integrate the perspectives of those living intimately with the land.

III. ECO-SUBALTERN IN SUNDARBANS

Divided between India and Bangladesh, the Sundarbans is geopolitically complex. This division can complicate coordinated conservation efforts, disaster management, and the provision of services, often leaving communities caught in the administrative gaps. The region's natural resources are vital but finite. Over-extraction (fish, timber, honey) by both local communities (due to necessity) and external actors (due to commercial interests) further strains the ecosystem. This also leads to human-wildlife conflict, a constant and terrifying threat for those who depend on the forest.

Fokir an "eco-subaltern" who, despite being illiterate, possesses deep environmental wisdom about the Sundarbans. This knowledge isn't theoretical; it's embodied and inherited, crucial for his survival in the tide country. Fokir's wisdom is holistic, integrating biological, spiritual, and social aspects of the environment. However, as a subaltern, his insights are often unheard and overlooked by those in power, including the scientific community, represented by Piya. Initially, Piya views the Sundarbans purely through an ecological lens, detached from its human inhabitants and their struggles.

The inherent power imbalance between Piya and Fokir persists despite their personal connection. Piya possesses economic, academic, and social privilege, while Fokir, despite his crucial ecological knowledge, remains economically vulnerable and socially marginalized, powerless against larger environmental and political forces. His tragic death in the cyclone serves as a powerful testament to the extreme vulnerability of marginalized communities to environmental disasters, particularly those

exacerbated by climate change, for which they bear no responsibility.

Fokir's death symbolizes the permanent silencing of a vital, indigenous ecological voice. His vast knowledge of the Sundarbans, passed down through generations, dies with him. This reflects the broader trend of traditional ecological knowledge being lost or suppressed in the face of "modern" development and environmental management, which often fail to incorporate local wisdom.

While Piya gains a deeper appreciation for the Sundarbans and its people through her experience with Fokir, his death highlights the limits of her scientific framework. Her data and instruments were not able to save him, nor could they fully capture the holistic understanding that Fokir possessed. It's a somber reminder that relying solely on scientific rationality can lead to a fundamental misunderstanding, and even erasure, of other crucial forms of knowledge. In essence, the relationship between Fokir and Piya is a compelling exploration of the clash and potential synergy between different ways of knowing. Fokir's death, however, serves as a tragic commentary on how, in the face of escalating environmental crises, the ecologically wise but structurally marginalized bear the brunt of the devastation and how their invaluable knowledge and very existence get tragically erased.

Much of the early discourse was shaped by western environmental movements, which historically have been critiqued for overlooking issues of social justice, especially in developing nations or among marginalized groups within developed nations. The concerns of "green" movements could sometimes appear to be a luxury for those not facing immediate existential threats from pollution or resource depletion. An overemphasis on "pristine" nature can lead to overlooking landscapes that have been shaped by human activity, particularly by marginalized groups who have often developed sustainable practices within those altered environments. As seen in instances like the Morichjhanpi massacre, the suppression of voice can tragically escalate to physical violence and eradication when marginalized communities attempt to assert their rights to land and livelihood.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the eco-subaltern framework transforms ecocriticism, making it a politically and socially engaged field. It progresses beyond simply appreciating nature to critically examining whose nature is prioritized and who bears the cost of environmental change. This framework emphasizes the crucial need to listen to marginalized voices, recognize their ecological wisdom, and confront environmental injustices. The complex realities of

vulnerable regions like the Sundarbans highlight the urgent need for an interdisciplinary approach that connects environmental ethics and subaltern historiography. Amitav Ghosh's "Hungry Tide" demonstrates that a full understanding of human-environment relationships requires examining the historical, political, and social dimensions of marginalization, power dynamics and silencing. The novel serves as a powerful literary example that gives voice to the silenced ecology and people.

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